

# Savvy Program Management

*Lt. Col. David R. King, USAF*



A program manager's performance often equates to the ability to influence others in getting something done—namely, a program manager's political skill. While the word “politics” has a negative connotation, it is more productive to accept that politics exist and recognize that political skills are often required to get things done.

Not being aware of one's political environment can lead to failure from either being unaware of political agendas or overusing power—situations that can be equally ineffective. For example, intelligent and successful people can fail when an agenda item or stakeholder group they did not anticipate is unexpectedly revealed. Alternatively, not understanding a situation can lead people to use influence when it is not needed. As a result, a program manager's political skills can be more important than knowing what to do in a given situation.

---

**King** is an acquisition officer who earned his doctoral degree in strategic management from Indiana University. He has broad program manager experience, including serving in the AC-130, F-15, F-22, F-117, and MQ-1 Predator programs.

Because of negative connotations with politics and the use of power, political skills are not often openly recognized as important. As a result, program managers are left to learn politics through firsthand experience. That leads to MIT Professor of Public Policy and Organization Harvey M. Sapolsky's observation that some program managers are better at politics than others, as different program managers' political skills will be largely limited to what they have seen work. While what works in any given situation varies, there are some simple ideas program managers can use to build their political skills.

### Appearance Matters

First, to be an effective program manager, you need to look and act the part in regard to demeanor, appearance, and product. Your demeanor as a program manager is important as it establishes expectations of what people can expect from you. Ultimately, you need to be consistent, and present yourself as someone who is dependable. When it comes to appearance, you should meet or exceed the dress standard for your organization. Things as simple as a good haircut or polished shoes send a message to others that you have the little things under control. With regards to completing a product, when you submit something, make it look professional or comply with the expected format or other conventions (i.e., complete it on time) to ensure you and your ideas are taken seriously, and to ensure they appear worthy of attention.

### Know Your Capabilities

Before considering a problem and how to address it, a program manager needs a realistic assessment of his or her strengths and weaknesses. Your choices will be limited by your strengths and weaknesses or by what you can realistically accomplish. Trying something that is beyond your capabilities may be the quickest way to lower your political capital by making it easy for others to take pleasure in any resulting misfortune. Having a realistic self-assessment of what you can do makes others more likely to want to work with you as a program manager. Leveraging the complementary strengths of others can allow a program manager to expand upon available choices and work with others in a team. If you work to establish only a single personal strength, focus on being known for having integrity. While no amount of integrity can compensate for a lack of skill, a lack of integrity can quickly doom efforts by even the most skilled.

### Develop a Shared Goal

Program management requires the cooperation of people outside of a program manager's direct chain of command to achieve goals and objectives. Even if they don't have direct control over everyone involved in the program, program managers still need to develop and communicate a common goal that can ensure people will work cooperatively. Ideally, the goal should be significant enough to justify additional work or willingness for personal sacrifice. When people are challenged to accomplish something, they are more likely to

fully employ their talents and have increased satisfaction. As a result, establishing formal goals offers the benefit of reducing potential conflict. All you have to do is bring people together with complementary skills and outline a worthy goal that enables them to accomplish more together than they could separately.

### Establish and Share Success

A program manager's success likely parallels how successful he or she makes the people working on a program feel. Instead of seeking the limelight, program managers need to liberally spread recognition across the people and organizations that contribute to a program. In the words of former U.S. President Harry S. Truman, "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit." Identify short-term milestones and celebrate each accomplishment on the way to a shared goal. Also, establish formal and informal ways to recognize accomplishments and contributions of others. Not everyone can or even wants to be an award winner, but most everyone appreciates receiving a handwritten note of thanks. Writing a note also helps to build a bond with the recipient, or it can help build your network.

### Build and Leverage a Network

A network is a collection of personal relationships that a program manager can use to share information and get advice. Your network should be mutually beneficial to all parties in it. Used effectively, your network can extend the concept of teamwork beyond your project team to a larger community. A network is built over time and is composed of people a program manager interacts with from work, service, personal life, and other activities. While people generally prefer to work with people with similar thinking styles or people with whom they are familiar, diverse teams often have a larger network. As a result, program managers should work to build teams and networks with people who are ex

**"What distinguishes programs in government is not that some play politics and others do not, but rather, that some are better at it than others."**  
**Harvey M. Sapolsky**

## **A program manager's political skills can be more important than knowing what to do in a given situation.**

perienced in as many areas as possible. Consistent with the adage “if we have the same opinion, one of us is expendable,” program managers should avoid filling their project teams with people similar to them to avoid looking at problems and solutions from too narrow a perspective.

### **Know the Issues**

As the program manager, your primary objective is to become the recognized expert and clearinghouse for information on your program. While no program manager will be effective without knowing his or her program and its associated issues, knowing the issues takes this a step further. A more effective program manager will stay ahead of the curve by anticipating issues through risk management and pushing information on how those risks are managed. That can be done by influencing what is on the agenda when a program is discussed or decisions need to be made.

Be proactive in identifying areas to focus upon, and then build plans with intermediate steps that demonstrate progress. If given the opportunity, help to define information that is used in analysis on your program, take part in the analysis, and be aware of and provide comparisons that put your program in a favorable position. For example, user testimonials can help legitimize the need and performance for a program because they come from the people who depend on how it performs. Controlling the information on your project can only be done if what you provide is accurate and you account for other positions. Again, integrity alone cannot save a project, but a lack of integrity can doom it.

### **Know the Environment**

An unhappy stakeholder can undermine a project and undo a lot of progress a program manager has made toward reaching a shared goal. Assessing a project's environment can be done in three steps:

- Identify the interested groups or stakeholders. Be careful to avoid limiting your list to allies and opponents, as neutral parties may later become important in deciding an outcome.
- Identify stakeholder interests. It is difficult, but you need to think about each group's position and work to determine their goals or what drives them. Simply trying

to identify solutions to an issue without stepping back to see how it became an issue will result in success only with a bit of luck. Work to find what arguments will effectively influence stakeholders.

- Evaluate the relative influence of the groups. Identifying a solution will require capturing a majority of stakeholder concerns, or at least the ones with the greatest influence. It will also be important to consider that your opponents are trying to do the same.

### **Work Hard**

Believing in something is part of what makes it happen. Treat failure as a success in identifying a way that does not work. If achieving something is important to you, then you should show others its importance by continually working hard to achieve it. Your hard work signals the importance of the task to the people working with you and to any potential opposition. Establishing a reputation for setting clear goals and working hard to achieve them establishes a level of commitment required if someone wants to do something different.

**“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.”**  
**Former U.S. President**  
**Harry S. Truman**

Working hard also helps establish a reputation for getting things done, and that will make it easier to accomplish things in the future. One caveat to working hard is the need to avoid getting so focused on the goal that you ignore other ways to achieve it. Equifinality is a concept that recognizes an outcome can be achieved by many different means. By changing how to accomplish something, a program manager may find that more people are willing to work toward the same goal.

Ultimately, your reputation as a program manager will depend on what you accomplish. Improved awareness and development of political skills will likely help you accomplish more and put you in a position to be more effective on your current project at the same time it opens additional opportunities. I hope some of the ideas outlined here will help you and your program.

---

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at [david.king2@wpafb.af.mil](mailto:david.king2@wpafb.af.mil).